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PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATIONS AND LEGISLATIVE ACTION
1974 TO 1977

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ABSTRACT

NASW state chapters have increasingly become involved in the pursuit of state legislative priorities. However, direct focus upon social problem concerns accounted for a minor and declining share of the chapters' foremost legislative priorities. Preoccupation with the institutionalization of professional status does not appear to be a transitional chapter concern associated only with the attainment of licensed status.

Social Work, like other professions, has developed professional associations which pursue multiple goals valued by their membership.

- 1) The advancement of social policies consistent with the values of the profession.
- 2) The development and enhancement of standards of practice.
- 3) The improvement of conditions of employment and the general employability of professional social workers.

The professional association's pursuit of these goals requires decision making for the relative allocation of limited organizational resources. This exploratory study attempts to discover the recent pattern of choices actually made in the pursuit of multiple goals by the state chapters of the National Association of Social Workers.

There are two primary reasons for this focus on the state-level legislative activities of NASW state chapters. First, state governments retain substantial domain over major areas of domestic policy. Among these fields are criminal justice, income maintenance, housing, services to children and the aged, education, regional planning, public health and mental health. Increased revenue sharing and the development of Title XX of the Social Security Act have further contributed to the social policy-making significance of state politics. During the 1974 to 1977 period of study, the individual states have also exerted authority over such specific policy controversies as the ratification of the equal

rights amendment, capital punishment, decriminalization of "victimless crimes," abortion access, and the "right to work."

The second major reason for this state-level focus concerns the profession itself. Social work practitioners may render a significant contribution to social policy development by their translation of those patterns of private troubles encountered in practice into public issues and proposals for remedial legislation.¹ State level professional associations embody greater potential responsiveness to the policy concerns of practitioners than a larger and more distant organization.

If Strumf and Granger are correct in describing this decade as a period for testing the innovative and range potential of state level, planning, an assessment of the state professional associations' legislative activities assumes added significance.²

As an exploratory study of national patterns of state chapter activities, this study does not examine the possible influence of variation in the level of organizational maturation on the pattern of legislative priorities. Both long established and relatively new state chapter organizations may benefit by the examination of state-level legislative activities.

This research is primarily based upon a survey conducted during the spring of 1977. The period of chapter activity covered in the questionnaire was from 1974 to 1977. Forty-six of the fifty state chapters (92%) responded to the survey with completed questionnaires.³

The fifteen item questionnaire and archival sources permitted the exploration of the following questions. How widespread is pursuit of state legislative priorities among the state level professional associations? Has there been a significant trend in the levels of such legislative activity during the period studied? To what extent have the state chapters employed lobbying strategies in the pursuit of their legislative objectives? What issues have been ranked as first priorities during the period? Has there been a trend in the legislative priorities addressed by the state professional associations? In order of presentation, the two categories of research findings concern the: (1) incidence of legislative action, and (2) the substantive priorities of those legislative activities.

INCIDENCE OF CHAPTER LEGISLATIVE ACTION

State chapter involvement in supporting and opposing legislative

proposals has become a characteristic role of these professional associations. Of the forty-six responding chapters, forty-three reported active pursuit of one or more state policy goals during the 1974 to 1977 period. During this period, the number of chapters reporting legislative activity nearly doubled. Twenty-four chapters reported the engagement of legislative action during 1974. This number increased to thirty-seven for 1975 and forty-two in 1976. Employment of lobbying increased three-fold during the period, from ten chapters in 1974 to thirty-one in 1976. This reported increase in legislative action among state chapters is attributable to both the emergence of a legislative action role within long-established state organizations and the early assumption of such a role by the more recently organized state chapters. In any case, this finding suggests that the profession of social work now has both organizational capacity and experience to pursue a range of professionally preferred policies at the state level of the American political system.

Eight of the state chapters reported a pursuit of state legislative goals for only one of the three years examined. Eleven chapters reported legislative activity for two of the three years and twenty-four chapters reported legislative action for each of the three years. Since the potential for legislative influence was not confined to regular legislative sessions, adjustments were not made for special or biennial session states.

Not only has the active pursuit of state legislative priorities been incorporated into the concerns of most state professional associations, but a significant increase in the level or intensity of these activities was widely reported. Thirty-eight of the forty-six responding chapters indicated that there had been a "significant increase" in the level of their legislative activities. The remaining eight responding chapters reported "no significant change" in the level of legislative activity during the period. This number includes the three responding chapters which reported inactivity throughout the period.

PRIORITY CONCERNS OF NASW STATE CHAPTERS

According to the National Association of Social Workers, the fields of poverty, income maintenance, racism, the social services, health, criminal justice, "manpower," and women in social welfare represent the priority concerns of the profession's political activity during this decade.⁴ The legislative priorities of state chapters, collectively did span the eight areas of policy listed above. To the extent that licensure of social work and third-party payment provisions improve

the quality and accessibility of the social services, this domain of policy was most frequently the subject of state chapter legislative activity. Of the policy areas directly focusing upon social problems in America, the fields of poverty and income maintenance were most frequently the subject of first priority legislative action. These concerns were followed distantly by issues within the realms of criminal justice and health. No state chapter reported the placement of first priority on issues within the fields of racism, manpower, or sexism, during any of the years studied.

In response to a request for the identification and ranking of second and third-order 1976 legislative priorities, nine of the forty-two active chapters identified only one priority. Several chapters reported a listing of more than twenty distinct legislative priorities. The second and third order concerns included ERA ratification, licensure, income maintenance, third-party payment for services, child abuse detection, day care, organization of mental health services, fair employment, and public social service provisions.

Examination of the issues listed by the state chapters as legislative priorities indicates that those priorities directed toward enactment of social problem solving policies account for a minor and declining share of the state chapters' legislative agenda. Slightly less than half of the chapters' first priorities were directed toward social problem solving proposals in 1974 (10 of 24). This proportion declined to a mere fifth by 1977 (9 of 42). The pursuit of legislative priorities which advance the political and economic interests of members and those directed toward professional practice standards increasingly overshadow such policy concerns as poverty, racism, health, sexism, criminal justice, and corrections.

Throughout the period examined in this study, state chapter legislative activity was characterized by a concentration on issues which were directly related to the concerns of professional status. Each of the forty-three chapters, which reported some legislative activity during the period, placed first priority upon licensure or the modification of provisions of an already existing licensure law for one or more years. Ten of the forty-three active chapters focused exclusively on the attainment of licensed status.

Social work licensure clearly emerges as the paramount legislative concern of the state level professional associations. This single issue accounted for slightly over half of the first priorities during 1974 (13 of 24). During 1975, licensure was ranked as the foremost

legislative priority by twenty-four of the thirty-seven active chapters. Twenty-seven of the forty-two chapters reporting legislative activity during 1976 placed first priority on licensure (64%).

The combination of social work licensure and third-party payment, each of which has a common relation to the institutionalization of professional status, accounted for fifty-seven percent of the first priorities in 1974 (13 of 24). This proportion increased to sixty-seven percent in 1975 (25 of 37). Thirty-three of the forty-two chapters, reporting legislative priorities in 1976, placed first priority on either licensure or third-party payment (78%).

The several first priorities, which followed distantly behind licensure, were cited by a similar number of state chapters in 1974. These priorities were distributed across the following concerns: public assistance, migrant labor rights, special education, school social services, correctional reform, and state supplements to the Supplemental Social Security Income program. Issues listed as first priority by chapters during 1975 included licensure, third-party payment, social service staffing and reorganization, child abuse detection and treatment, public assistance, home health care for the aged, adult corrections, juvenile corrections, opposition to the death penalty, and racial anti-discrimination provisions. In 1976, however, third-party payment was a distinctive but distant second to licensure. Six of the forty-two active chapters placed first priority on third-party payment provisions compared to the twenty-seven first priority rankings of licensure. The remaining first priorities included state tax reform, prison reform, children's abuse, ombudsman provisions for nursing home patients, inclusion of social services within public health systems, and opposition to proposed budget cuts in AFDC, GA and public social service staffs.

Sectors of the professional community have historically expressed concern for the adverse effect of institutional entrenchment on the character and vigor of social work's commitment to social change. However, advocates of licensure may argue that the attainment of legally sanctioned professional status fosters the development of the political influence needed for successful reform efforts. This implies that the state chapters' pursuit of status-enhancing legislative priorities merely precedes a more viable social problem legislative focus. The validity of such an explanation of chapters' agenda and the "transition-forecast" may be partially tested by comparing the chapter priorities across states which provide differing degrees of legal status for the profession. If chapters operating within a context of legal regulation, particularly licensure, direct a greater share of their first priorities toward social problem concerns- than where legal

regulation is absent, support for the transition projection would be indicated.

The following table compares two types of chapters, in terms of their foremost legislative priorities. One set of chapters are those operating in states where some mode of legal regulation of the social work profession was established. The other set of priorities emerged in a state which had not enacted some mode of regulation at that time. Both registration and licensure constitute forms of legal regulation.

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF NUMBER-ONE PRIORITIES
BY DIFFERENCES IN THE LEGAL REGULATION OF SOCIAL WORK
1974-1977

| Priority Concern | Legal Regulation Established (n=34) | | Legal Regulation Absent (n=69) | | Total (n=103) | |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|---------------|-----|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Licensure of Social Work | 16 | 47 | 47 | 68 | 63 | 61 |
| Third-Party Payment Provisions | 7 | 21 | - | - | 7 | 7 |
| Social Problem Solving Policies and Services | 11 | 33 | 22 | 32 | 33 | 32 |
| | | 100 | | 100 | | 100 |

These findings do not support the view that the attainment of some mode of legal regulation fosters social problem directed chapter priorities. A very similar proportion of first priorities were so directed in the absence of legal regulation.

David Hardcastle's classification of the states' regulation of social work permits a comparison of chapter priority concerns across professional regulatory contexts of varying strengths.⁵ Simple registration refers to the legal protection of the use of the title. The certification label is comparable to the class of statutes generally characterized as providing for licensure. The distinction between "strong" and "weak" certification is based upon the extent of conformity of a state's licensure law to the various components of NASW's model licensure statute.⁶ Table 2 compares the foremost legislative priorities of the forty-two chapters active during 1976. These comparisons indicate that

the extent of emphasis upon third-party payment rather than direct focus upon social problems, increases with the strength of professional legal regulation secured. Of the five chapters in states providing the strongest licensure statutes, one sought an amendment to the existing licensure law and the remaining four chapters placed first priority on third-party payment concerns.

TABLE 2
STATE CHAPTER PRIORITY CONCERNS
BY TYPE OF LEGAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK

| First Priority Field | Regulation Absent (n=27) | | Simple Registration (n=6) | | Certification | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----|---------------------------------|----|---------------|----|-----------------|----|
| | | | | | Weak (n=4) | | Strong (n=5) | |
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Licensure | 20 | 74 | 4 | 66 | 2 | 50 | 1 | 20 |
| Third-Party Payment | - | - | 1 | 17 | 1 | 25 | 4 | 80 |
| Social Problem and Service Area | 7 | 26 | 1 | 17 | 1 | 25 | - | - |
| | <u>100</u> | | <u>100</u> | | <u>100</u> | | <u>100</u> | |

Crosstabulation of the second and third order priorities for 1976, by variations in the legal context of social work, revealed only one distinctive pattern. Mental health services were typically subject to second priority attention, where "strong" certification-licensure had been established (4 of 5). Interestingly, the same chapters were found to place first priority upon third-party payment during 1976.

Reference to the issues subject to the state chapters' lobbying efforts further supports the conclusion that, at least during the period studied, the state professional associations have primarily based their legislative priorities upon status concerns. Of the thirty-two chapters reporting a use of this influence strategy during the period, twenty-six chapters applied the strategy on behalf of licensure objectives for one or more years (81%). Of the nine chapters, employing this relatively assertive influence strategy during only one of the three years, eight focused those efforts toward licensure. For the period as a whole, eighty-one percent of the lobbying addressed

priorities involved licensure (42) or third-party payment (5): (47 of 58). Other concerns, addressed through chapter lobbying, included income maintenance, public social service staffing, aging services, child welfare services, corrections, and public health.

IMPLICATIONS

In the 1940s Kenneth Pray asserted that the "usefulness of professional associations as an instrument of social action is necessarily limited by their primary functional concern with professional standards."⁷ This exploratory study of NASW state chapter legislative activities does suggest that the latter function has been preferred. As with other professions, social work's definition of "professional standards" may be problematically related to consumer and public interests. While the effects of licensure and third-party payment may be tenuously related to service quality and service consumer "freedom of choice", each of these priorities serve to increase the profession's access to systemic privileges and prestige. Professional preoccupation with these status-enhancing legislative priorities is consonant with the traditional model of professionalism being pursued by social work. Neither serve to directly advance social work's aspirations for the humanization of direct services or social structural reforms.

When one legislative concern overwhelms a professional agenda, at any level of government, there is reason to scrutinize the distribution of benefits wrought by the legislative objective. Although policy impact is a familiar subject of social work research, little evidence has been brought to bear on the actual consequences of social work licensure. If the emergent view in the sociology of occupations is generalizable to the case of social work, then the most direct and primary consequence of licensure is an improved political economy for the profession itself.⁸ The issue of distributive benefits of professional policy priorities is fundamental, if the reduction of gross inequalities of life chances remains a social work commitment. Given the stated ideals of social work, the mix of professional legislative priorities might be expected to reflect some capacity for the subordination of professional self-interests to those social sectors lacking the necessities of existence and nurturance. The political agenda of professional associations, at least partially, reflect the level of commitment to the above altruistic ideal. And it is this commitment which may ultimately legitimate an individual and collective claim to professional status. Organizational preoccupation with member self-interest policies can no more be distinguished as "professional" than the individual practitioner's subordination of client interests. Policy

makers increasingly associate professional organizations with monopolistic industrial associations. Unfortunately, the findings of this study provide a weak basis for countering such a claim.

Could the nature of the commitment of social work practitioners to state policy relevancy partially account for the limited range of NASW state chapter priorities? In response to a recent open-ended inquiry, thirty-four of the responding forty-three chapter presidents cited member apathy as a primary factor limiting their legislative effectiveness. One chapter president simply explained, "This drastically changes (apathy) when issues become pocketbook concerns."

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 William Schwartz, "Private Troubles or Public Issues: One Social Work Job or Two?" Social Welfare Forum (N.Y., Columbia University Press, 1969) pp. 22-43
- 2 J. Strumpf and B. Granger, "State Welfare Planning: An Essay," In Harleight Trecker ed. Goals for Social Welfare 1973-1993. (N.Y.: Association Press, 1973) pp. 184-224
- 3 A commitment was made to refrain from identifying individual chapters. The four non-responding chapters were geographically dispersed and representative of the composition of states, according to legal regulation of social work.
- 4 Educational Legislative Action Network: Operations Manual. (N.Y.: National Association of Social Workers, 1975) p. 6
- 5 Kenneth Pray, "Social Work and Social Action" in Proceedings. National Conference of Social Work, 1948, p. 500
- 6 Randall Collins, Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science. (N.Y.: Academic Press, 1975) p. 342
- 7 David Hardcastle, "Public Regulation of Social Work" Social Work (January 1977) pp. 14-20
- 8 Hardcastle, op. cit., pp. 14-20